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Best value and workplace partnership in local government

Best value and
workplace
partnership

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores employee experiences concerning job security/insecurity, workload, job satisfaction and employee involvement in the aftermath of Best Value reviews in a local authority.

Design/methodology/approach – Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques employees' experiences of Best Value reviews in a local authority are compared and contrasted with council staff employed elsewhere in the authority to establish the extent to which workplace partnership principles have taken hold under a Best Value regime.

Findings – Little evidence of positive outcomes was found from partnership at work under a Best Value regime. The constraints imposed by central government, under which managers in the public sector operate, contributed significantly to partnership at work remaining little more than a hollow shell.

Originality/value – This paper provides a recent in-depth case study of the experience of workplace partnership, which was developed not discrete from but as part of the Best Value modernisation programme in a local authority.

Keywords Best practice, Partnership, Trade unions, Employee involvement

Paper type Case study

Introduction

In the last two decades, public sector services have come under mounting pressure to improve performance and reduce costs in service delivery. Successive Conservative governments exposed many local public services to compulsory competitive tendering (CCT). The number of services provided by local authorities was reduced by transferring them to the private sector mainly to cut the cost of delivery. Concomitant with this change was a shift towards greater accountability to service-users together with the introduction of performance targets; factors that radically altered the framework in which public sector industrial relations operated. Following the election of New Labour in 1997, CCT was abolished. Its replacement, Best Value, far from reversing Conservative local government reforms sought to both broaden and strengthen them (Martin, 2000). Competitive tendering was no longer to be mandatory, but its coverage was extended to include all local government services. The seeming contradiction embodied in the Best Value principles of cost-saving and continuous quality improvement demanded greater control through performance indicators training, monitoring and evaluation arrangements (Martin, 2000). Despite operational differences, in ideological terms Best Value shares much in common with the CCT regime. Competition and competitive tendering are central:

...retaining work in-house without subjecting it to real competitive pressure can rarely be justified. Should an authority exercise that choice and the service fail to provide Best Value, continuing in-house provision would not be sustainable (Cmnd 4014, 1998, Clause 7.28).



Best Value differs from CCT in one important aspect. Trade union and staff involvement is seen as important to develop the level of trust and co-operation necessary to form part of a new control mechanism for New Labour's public sector modernisation programme (Whitfield, 2001, p. 116). Best Value embraces the partnership at work agenda with its emphasis on a joint approach to service improvement. This approach focuses more on partnership as an agreement between the employer and trade unions rather than as a process involving employees. This explains why, where local authorities were adequately resourced, co-operation of trade unions is seen as key to the successful launching of Best Value pilot exercises. In practice involvement of public service staff is marginal (Martin *et al.*, 2001, p. 152). Under Best Value partnership, in essence, is "procedural in form, and unitary in specification" (Novitz, 2002).

The dilemma faced by public sector unions is whether to engage with partnership, and attempt to steer it towards a more pluralistic agenda, or mobilise opposition to it on the premise that its disarming nature may well leave workers defenceless against the possibility of unfavourable outcomes. Theoretical support for the partnership approach associated with Best Value can be found in Ackers (2002) and Ackers and Payne (1998). In essence they argue that the rationale underpinning partnership offers the only realistic long-term solution to the regeneration of the union movement. Ackers (2002, p. 17) contends that the potency of partnership is that it is rooted in an "ethical agenda of social integration", contained within a new "neo-pluralist" framework. Emphasis is placed on strengthening the links between the employment relationship, social purpose of employment and civil society. He posits that inclusion of civil society in a network of normative institutions collaborating with state regulation bodies provides a vision for taking partnership at work forward, promising a new rationale for trade unions. Critics of partnership indicate that this perspective may provide a gloss to the real nature of partnership – to secure worker accommodation behind a veil of co-operative relations – by involving unions "in propagating managerial ideology and administering management policy" (McIlroy, 2000, p. 29) in order to suppress conflict. The government has set its stall in linking with those public sector union leaderships committed to working in partnership with the government: "Forward-looking trade unions know that the future is about partnership, and are leading the way in a number of projects" (Office of Public Service Reform, 2002, p. 21).

The pressures for consensus, however, cannot hide the conflicts, tensions and contradictions inherent in the employment relationship. This explains why government preoccupations and academic concerns in combination have supported a burgeoning literature on "partnership at work". Few of the contributions have considered the experience of employees, in spite of the insistence in the prescriptive literature that employees are at the centre of partnership relations (Guest and Peccei, 2001). The one notable exception, a study on Best Value pilots in UK local public services, indicated negative outcomes for front-line staff (Geddes, 2001). What emerged from this study were signs of reduced staffing levels, limited trade union voice, increased numerical and functional flexibility, and evidence of work intensification. This case study suggests that the early experience of Best Value has resulted in the strengthening of management's ability to restructure the Labour process and employment relations to the detriment of many public sector employees. This picture complements the view that the government, in promoting the partnership agenda, is

intent on achieving significant progress towards extending internal and external flexibility in both the public and private sectors (Cmnd 3863, 1998).

Drawing on a single local authority case study this paper explores employee experiences concerning job security/insecurity, workload, job satisfaction, and employee involvement. At the time of our research two key services, local taxation and payroll, in the areas surveyed, had just undergone Best Value reviews. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of employees in these departments with council staff employed elsewhere in the authority in areas yet to be Best-Valued, we found little evidence of positive employment outcomes from partnership. We explain this not in term of management failure to recognise the pre-requisites for an effective partnership, but in terms of the constraints imposed by central government under which managers in the public sector operate. It is these constraints driven by New Labour's liberalising agenda that dictate the struggle to assert particular organisational priorities and goals. This Labour-controlled local authority had previously piloted a positive flexibility project in collaboration with the TUC, the local government employers' organisation, and local government unions. The TUC regarded this experiment as a success and have marked it as a positive example of partnership working. Therefore, it is of particular interest to examine the subsequent experience of workplace partnership, which was developed not discrete from but as part of the Best Value modernisation programme in this local authority.

Research design

The research, conducted in 2001, used a mix of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to assemble employees' experiences at a local authority (CityCo) with 18,500 staff. Membership of the largest trade unions, UNISON, T&GWU and GMB totalled around 4,000; 800; and 700, respectively. Taped interviews were carried out with four representatives from these unions and one UCATT representative. At the workplace, taped interviews were conducted with 22 senior and line managers, and 62 staff employed in a variety of occupations in several key services staffed by around 3,235 employees. Survey questionnaires were distributed to a sample of staff across these services[1]. In all, 747 questionnaires were distributed and 389 completed; a response rate of 52 per cent. In the Best-Valued areas (local taxation and payroll) 30 interviews were conducted and 148 questionnaires distributed, of which 89 were returned, a 60 per cent response rate.

The paper is organised as follows: first we examine the part played by trade unions at the local level in co-operating with the introduction and establishment of Best Value and workplace partnership. Second, we evaluate the impact of Best Value on job security, work intensification and job satisfaction. Third, attention is directed towards employee involvement, as improvements in consultation and participation in management decision-making are included in the TUC's list of essential principles in partnership arrangements and within the Best Value "ethos" (TUC, 2001). Finally, a conclusion summarises and interprets findings within a critical industrial relations framework.

The role of local trade unions in Best Value and workplace partnership

New Labour's view that partnership relations and practices between employers and employees lead to improved organisational performance and greater employment

security has been strongly supported by the TUC (2001). The guiding principles for partnership and joint working on Best Value were set down in an agreement between the national employers and the main recognised trade unions (GMB, T&GWU, UNISON) in the National Joint Council Framework (NJCF) Agreement (2000). This agreement conferred institutional legitimacy on union involvement in the Best Value process and despite unease among UNISON activists that the government was putting cost before quality, unions remained critically supportive (Geddes, 2001; Martin *et al.*, 2001). The existence of two-tier workforces in local government contracted out services was of greater concern (UNISON, 2002) than partnership outcomes associated with the TUC's list of essential principles. In respect to Best Value pilot runs, Geddes (2001) found that generally the level of trade union involvement was much greater at national level than at local level. The situation we encountered in our case study was less clear. Throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s, the trade unions had a good relationship with the local authority management at our research site. CityCo for most of this period was Labour-controlled, as it was at the time of our research. In 1996 it became a unitary authority consisting of 35 wards with 70 elected councillors responsible for delivering the full range of local council services. In 2000, CityCo adopted a cabinet structure comprising a Cabinet Office and five departments: Education and Lifelong Learning; Environment, Transport and Leisure; Neighbourhood and Housing Services; Social Services and Health; Central Support Services. New personnel policies had been introduced, such as positive action in recruitment of people from ethnic minority groups, as part of its policy to promote equality. In partnership with the trade unions different work-life balance schemes had been introduced. The unions were keen to maintain their collaborative relationship. Interviews with local full-time representatives of the main unions (UNISON, T&GWU and GMB) revealed that they were heavily involved in the discourse and practice of partnership and Best Value at CityCo, a strategy in which they were all united.

Full-time lay officials of the unions, enthused by the election of a Labour government in 1997, supported the replacement of CCT with Best Value. But a more guarded oppositional approach was adopted when it became clear that the performance levels and organisational processes set by Best Value reviews forced the local authority to consider outsourcing services if it was unable to get the service improvements required in-house. This development served to deepen the involvement of the unions in Best Value steering groups, as the following comment from one UNISON full-time lay official affirms:

It's become more and more obvious that it's [Best Value] really an outsourcing exercise, then we got angrier and angrier about it. But at the same time we tried to emphasise the need of getting a trade unionist on every steering group and with the other unions we've worked to do that.

These steering groups usually comprised 12 council officials and three union representatives (who were usually full-time lay officials). Their role was to find ways to improve services by sharing best practice, and identifying and correcting deficiencies. By participating in steering groups trade union officials could attend Best Value review panel meetings. One of the responsibilities of these panels was to assess whether the public would be better served by externalising services or keeping them in-house. The unions' strategy was to secure a more powerful voice on these bodies to gain more leverage in respect to the decisions regarding the implementation of

Best Value and the associated changes to the Labour process, job security and quality of working life. Criticism of Best Value *per se* was directed at central rather than local government. A T&G full-time lay official outlined and justified this strategy in these words:

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I much prefer our people be involved in trying to lead the debate where we want it to go and achieve what we want to achieve in terms of defending our members, rather than be on the outside looking in and have no influence, because it seems to me you can get involved in a process and if it looks like it's bad news, you can withdraw. Personally I'm not sure if I'd advocate that, because if it looks like it's being nasty it seems to me there's even more reason to be involved in it, because you could be into some form of damage limitation type exercise.

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As well as a "damage limitation exercise" the unions' rationale for involvement in Best Value and partnership included taking into account the interests of a wider constituency of "stakeholders". At face value this appears to reflect partnership as outlined by Ackers' (2002) "neo-pluralist" stand. This is how a full-time lay official described it:

The first point is that you have to accept that the reason why we're here in the local authorities is to provide services to the people of [the City]. That's fundamentally the point, because without those people to provide the services for, we don't exist...

So the partnership arrangement becomes, as a matter of Best Value process, not just about the interaction between management and union, it's about management and union, management and staff who might not be a member of the union, it's about management and public...

This commitment to cementing the links between union activity, paid work and wider society resonates with the idea that an alternative industrial relations regime could be developed based on social cohesion between trade unions, local communities, and local and central government. However, missing from this equation is public service workers' involvement in and experience of new ways of working under the Best Value regime. According to one senior personnel manager the trade unions had "an almost paternal approach to saying well we know what's best for the workforce and indeed for the council". While one full-time lay official maintained that the development of partnership working as part of Best Value

manifested itself in [CityCo] is very much along the lines of institutions and almost, in some areas management say, "as long as I've spoken to [you the full-time union official], then I've spoken to all of those people as well, because you are the representative".

Full-time lay officials were concerned with defending traditional aspects of the employment relationship, particularly job security and pay. They regarded the attainment of mooted partnership outcomes such as job satisfaction and employee involvement, as secondary "a bonus ... in terms of the ever decreasing budget situation". There was an acceptance, albeit grudgingly, that the frontier of control had shifted towards management and the process of employee involvement was restricted to increased consultation. Keeping services in-house was regarded as the best way to defend existing jobs and levels of pay. Echoing the national policy of their respective unions, local trade unions secured support from local authority managers responsible for co-ordinating the implementation of Best Value:

Some of the local tax managers were absolutely excellent in the process and if the city council wants to have a look at a process in terms of Best Value where you've got management and unions working together to achieve an end, which in this case was to make sure that the city council maintained control of the operation, I don't think you'll find a better example.

The shift of the centralised and institutional form of industrial relations arrangements to local authority level served to expedite union engagement with Best Value. Senior management at CityCo worked with the local union hierarchy to hammer out restructuring plans to achieve service improvements designed to meet Best Value requirements and keep services in-house. The problem for unions in pursuing this strategy was that this could put them in a weakened position (due to their complicity in the implementation of Best Value) to effectively join or organise a campaign against Best Value, if the changes that it brought about turned out to be detrimental to CityCo's workforce. Union officials were aware of this:

There's a difficulty with being involved in it [Best Value] so far as if you're involved and it goes wrong, you can be seen as being complicit with it.

By joining forces with managers in Best Value panels and steering groups, local unions continued to service their members at arms length. The emphasis the unions placed on working closely with the employers was grounded on the well-embedded co-operative relationship the unions had with CityCo. Therefore, initially, this policy of co-operation with local authority management in engaging with Best Value was not seen as particularly contentious. The thought of mobilising union membership in opposition to Best Value, or developing union participation, at the local level, was never envisaged, which left the bargaining position of union officials very weak. In these circumstances the workforce was in a highly vulnerable position and options other than compliance to service improvement plans, based on keeping services in-house, were limited as the remarks by a local taxation employee suggest:

They [management] were putting all these measures together to make it [the service] cheaper and the unions went along with it because they didn't agree with services being out-sourced. We had a union meeting that clashed here and. . . [the union representative] said "well I'm not concerned about June 2002 all I'm concerned about is the moment [2001] and securing your jobs with CityCo as your employer". They'll worry about that when they come across it. But I just think a lot of people will be out of work and I really wouldn't like to be one of those people that are left.

We turn now to consider the implications of this union strategy for employees. First we look at job insecurity, work intensification and job satisfaction.

Best Value: security of employment, the intensification of work and job satisfaction

Job insecurity

I see Best Value as the biggest threat to jobs in local government that there's ever been, with the possible exception of competitive tendering (CityCo, T&G full-time official).

We thought Best Value was a good thing and would open up opportunities but as things have developed we have changed our mind. We are now in fear of Best Value and associate it with Downsizing (CityCo, Business Development Manager).

Our data suggests that union officials were right to perceive Best Value as a catalyst powerful enough to raise the spectre of job insecurity, despite union efforts to counter such an outcome through its involvement strategy. Interviews with CityCo staff suggest that their understanding of job insecurity is similar to the definitions on employment and job insecurity provided by Standing (1999) cited in Burchell (2002, p. 63). Job insecurity refers to dismissal, lay-off, short-time, job redesign and job redeployment.

Best Value reviews, and the subsequent restructuring and reorganisation of work, triggered feelings of job insecurity. Some of the staff interviewed in payroll, one of the departments subjected to a Best Value review, expressed concern that managers were playing on employees' sense of job insecurity by regular announcements about the threat of outsourcing:

We keep on being told about this firm or that firm out there who wants to take the business away from the Council. You know, they're all going to outsource it or, you know, bring in firms who are gonna come in and take the payroll away.

Another payroll employee reported that a reduction in core staff followed the implementation of Best Value: "they just cut and cut staff and we just had to cope and do it". Increasingly, payroll relied on temporary and agency staff due to the uncertainty about future job security under the Best Value regime. This was a different strategy to that carried out at local taxation, the second Best Value department. Here, once it was decided that the service was to be retained in-house, temporary workers, widely used in the period of uncertainty, were given an opportunity to apply for a limited number of jobs on a permanent contract. The idea was that the infusion of new blood would accelerate acceptance of change or induce long-term members of staff to volunteer for redundancy.

The view of many local taxation staff was that despite the difficulties of covering the main contents of the job "at the end of the day they're going to have to cut people because that's the budget they've got". None the less, the general feeling was that concerns about job security would be even greater if the service was outsourced. CityCo's redeployment policy was flagged up as an important lifeline to those employees identified as surplus to requirement. However, insecurity also stems from redeployment due to diminished career progression prospects and the subsequent impact on the chances of pay advancement by moving through the pay scales. As one local taxation officer observed:

In the last ten years I've had five different [Council] jobs and any one of them hasn't been through choice. They've all been redeployments...

Now I got this job permanently in November 2000 and in June 2002 we'll have another review and there's going to be dramatic job cuts in the implementation of the service work plan.

This insecurity was also recognised by CityCo's head of property and financial services:

Now these are people [local taxation staff] with good career, good track records, probably doing this for 20 years and yet they find themselves in a redundancy situation where it is quite difficult to say, "well what's the outside market for these skills?".

Job insecurity was also perceived in non Best-Valued departments but often it was tied to the thought that they would soon be in line for a review, with the possibility that their work might be outsourced. For example one employee commented:

Curiously, under CCT, at the time the tenders were let, there was always a fear about the job and job security; because you either won it or you didn't. . . Best Value, curiously, has made it worse because the fear a lot of people have is that almost at any time, the client can say, sorry you're no longer giving us best value, we're going to change the contractor. It's fairly clear cut, CCT, you're either cheapest or you're not, Best Value is an element of subjectivity I suppose.

This aside, the dominant view in these non Best-Valued departments was that although local authority jobs are not as secure as they had been, job security was "reasonable now compared with the private sector".

Table I presents employees' views on job security taken from the questionnaire survey. It compares employees' views on job security in Best-Valued and non Best-Valued departments. The results show that many staff in Best-Valued departments are particularly concerned about the effects of job insecurity.

In the non Best-Valued departments surveyed, 62 per cent of the non-managerial staff agreed or strongly agreed that they felt their job was secure. In sharp contrast only 40 per cent of staff in Best-Valued departments did so. Moreover, only 41 per cent of the latter indicated that they thought their managers were good or very good at maintaining the job security of council employees, compared to 57 per cent of staff surveyed in non Best-Valued departments.

Work intensification

Shifts in the organisation of work and staff utilisation precipitated, for many employees, significant increases in work intensification, especially in the Best-Valued departments. The Best Value review in the local taxation department involved a market-testing process and as a consequence an explicit threat of service externalisation. Management were divided over whether the service should be outsourced or kept in-house with the directorate supporting the former and the local taxation manager supporting the latter. The outcome was to retain the service in-house based on the implementation of a seven-year service improvement plan. Undoubtedly

Table I.
CityCo's employees' views (excluding managers) on job security: comparison between Best-Valued and non-Best-Valued departments, *n* = 342

Department	Strongly agree/agree (per cent)	Disagree/strongly disagree (per cent)	Undecided (per cent)
<i>I feel my job is secure in this workplace *</i>			
Best-Valued departments	40	47	13
All other surveyed departments	62	28	10
	Very good/good (per cent)	Poor/very poor (per cent)	Undecided (per cent)
<i>How good are your managers at maintaining the job security of council employees?</i>			
Best-Valued departments	41	30	29
All other surveyed departments	57	25	18
Note: *Chi-square test significant at the 0.05 level			

the support provided by the trade unions influenced the final decision, as the local taxation manager confirmed:

We were enormously helped by our relationships with the trade unions. The key players in our consultation were Transport & General and Unison and they were extremely pragmatic, helpful, everything. Very supportive and have continued to be helpful.

The main reason for keeping the service in-house was that after completion of the bidding process it became clear that compared with the internal bid, based on the seven-year plan, externalisation would not yield a significant saving in cost. The service improvement plan involved gradually reducing the numbers employed in local taxation staff. Generic working (multi-tasking), a policy first introduced in 1997, would continue but in a modified form. Customer focus teams were established in order to clear the volume of work that had built up in certain areas. Membership of these teams was based on a monthly rota system and involved staff taking on a wide range of specialist taxation roles; commercial business rates, council tax billing, council tax collection and tax recovery. In addition these teams helped to roster a new “call centre” for service users. In short, the Best Value process catalysed a significant increase on an already heavy workload. A local taxation manager, under pressure to meet aggressive performance targets, recognised the impact this was having on staff:

[That staff] were asked to become all singing/all dancing people and a lot of people actually were down-graded during the restructure and now they’ve moved into a huge technological change... Performance targets, individual performance targets and a requirement of trying to communicate to them ... that you will never be in an unchanging environment again. This is the pace at which we must accept, we all have to work at because whilst there is the requirement for continuous improvement that will naturally lend itself to continual change.

The introduction of dedicated customer service teams; a new computer based document management system (scanning and storing documents electronically); windows-based personal computers; online payment facility; and extended opening times were accompanied with monitoring, performance testing and target setting. Staffs were expected to complete a pre-set amount of work per day. And following the introduction of generic working and the establishment of dedicated customer service teams, targets were gradually increased and every “single second of the day” had to be justified.

Staff in payroll indicated that the Best Value review was a somewhat clandestine affair. As in local taxation the directorate favoured outsourcing the service, while payroll management fought and won to keep it in-house. Staff were ill-informed and as one officer remarked kept “very much in the dark”. There was little information coming through union channels. Although payroll passed the Best Value review, according to one line manager “other than a few one liners that may have been thrust at them, it was never gone into in that much depth. It’s just that, yes, we came through it, we carry on now”. Staff certainly felt the impact of the review; downsizing, the use of temporary and agency staff, and cost cutting precipitated increases in intensive work effort. A moratorium on the recruitment of permanent staff led to an increase in the use of agency and temporary staff. While to a limited degree this externalised job insecurity, it intensified the work of permanent staff, as

they had to monitor and manage the work of temporary and agency staff. As one payroll officer reported:

It's [the workload] accumulating all the time, and the approach too which is to drag a few temporary staff in to do the job. But the problem there is obviously, you know, drag a few temporary staff in, they need to be trained up, that impacts on me.

A line manager acknowledged the increase in work but she remarked that “even if they feel that they are working harder. . . the initial consolation is that everybody else on the same grade is working equally hard”. In effect this put “the ills of work back on the shoulders of those fellow ‘victims’” (Sennett, 1998, pp. 115-6).

Our quantitative survey data indicate that most employees perceived work had intensified at CityCo, especially in the Best-Valued areas, as Table II demonstrates. The proportion of staff indicating that the increase in the amount of work they were expected to complete each week, compared to three years ago, was significantly greater in Best-Valued departments than was the case in non Best-Valued departments.

Job satisfaction

Although other sections of this paper touch on issues relating to job satisfaction, for example job security and employee involvement, this section examines two specific intrinsic factors, level of job influence and sense of achievement relating to the quality of working life. Table III compares these two key aspects across Best-Valued and non Best-Valued departments.

The majority of the staff employed in Best-Valued departments indicated that they were dissatisfied with the amount of influence they had over their job. In contrast, the majority of the staff in non Best-Valued departments indicated they were satisfied in

Table II.
Employees' experience
(excluding managers)
of work intensification
at CityCo; comparison
between Best-Valued
and non Best-Valued
departments: *n* = 342

	Increased (per cent)	Decreased (per cent)	Unchanged (per cent)
<i>Change to the amount of work I am expected to complete each week*</i>			
Best-Valued departments	75	3	22
All other surveyed departments	59	4	37
Note: *Chi-square test significant at the 0.05 level			

Table III.
Employee job satisfaction
(excluding managers):
comparison between
Best-Valued and non
Best-Valued departments,
n = 342

Department	Very satisfied/satisfied (per cent)	Dissatisfied/ very dissatisfied (per cent)	Undecided (per cent)
<i>How satisfied are you with the amount of influence you have over your job?*</i>			
Best-Valued departments	41	53	6
All other surveyed departments	61	31	8
<i>How satisfied are you with the sense of achievement you get from your work?</i>			
Best-Valued departments	44	48	8
All other surveyed departments	63	29	8
Note: *Chi-square test significant at the 0.05 level			

this respect. Dissatisfaction was particularly prevalent among local taxation officers. The service improvement plan removed much of the influence this group felt they had over their job:

We have no control over our work at all now. We are told that we will work on post for this two week period or you will work on a report of, I don't know maybe liability order cases, then we move on to the next recovery stage for the next few weeks . . . (local taxation officer).

Similarly, only just over two-fifths of staff in Best-Valued departments expressed that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the sense of achievement they got from their work, while markedly nearly two-thirds of non Best-Valued staff did so. Again local taxation officers fared badly on this measure:

Now, because of the way the work is issued, it used to be you had your area and you used to deal with that, now its a question of okay all this work needs to be done so you just get given a pile of work. You probably have no knowledge of the area of any of the people within it so you don't get the satisfaction of following that through at all.

And the following comments echo the dissatisfaction of the majority of payroll staff:

I used to come into work on a Monday morning and enjoy, you know, enjoy the company, the actual whole feel of the place. Everybody seemed to be working to the same goal; we were all working as a team. . . These days, it seems the team atmosphere's gone. Everybody seems to be working for themselves these days; again that's partly due to the amount of work every individual's got.

Best Value: employee involvement

Communications and participation in management decision-making

The principle that councils should "allow unions to become one of the architects of change" was an important aspect of Best Value working provided by the NJCF agreement. Advocates of partnership argue that advantages will be forthcoming for both employers and employees if staffs are more involved in organisational decision-making and employers and trade unions work together in co-operation. Staff will benefit from a relationship based on greater trust (Guest and Peccei, 2001; Makin *et al.*, 1996, pp. 234, 276-7). But the readiness of councils to involve employees was geared more towards facilitating change than empowering them in the decision-making process. Our findings, similar to Geddes (2001), show that employee participation under Best Value was more about downward communication than engaging employees in a two-way dialogue about change. Table IV shows that employee involvement in decision making was perceived to be poor or very poor across the departments we surveyed. Staff in Best-Valued departments, however, registered more negative scores than did non Best-Valued departments. One local taxation administrator observed: "we were involved [in the service improvement plan]. We were asked questions. But I don't think our decision or our input had anything to do with the [final] decision". Local taxation employees sensed that their views were "filtered" or "vetoed", consequently they felt excluded from the decision-making process.

The results from our survey presented in Table IV suggest that managers in Best-Valued departments were perceived to be much better at communicating with their staff than their counterparts in non Best-Valued departments. Employees' evaluation of how good their managers were at keeping everyone up to date about

proposed changes at work was significantly superior in Best-Valued departments than in non Best-Valued departments. Moreover, almost half of staff in Best-Valued departments signalled that managers were good or very good at providing employees with the chance to comment on proposed changes against 38 per cent of non Best-Valued staff. Best-Valued and non Best-Valued departments were evenly divided on the question “how good are managers at responding to suggestions from employees”, with only one third of all respondents returning a positive score. These results highlight our view that Best Value is more to do with facilitating change than empowering employees in the organisational decision-making process.

Certainly the local taxation employees we interviewed confirmed that communications had improved, although this was not the case for payroll employees. It seems that local taxation was an exemplar case in respect to information provision related to the Best Value process:

I don't think you can fault the amount of communications that are in place. Getting information from the top down there are a number of methods and that you feel perhaps there is maybe too much of it because there is a bit of this information overload. But it's all about being open with staff and keep the staff informed. You know, “we've got nothing to hide, we want you to know what's going on” and then we can comment and have feedback (local taxation officer).

The better ratings local taxation received in respect to communication were largely but not solely based on cascading information downwards. In local taxation, the senior manager briefed line managers three times a week. These were formal briefings, and minutes were taken and distributed to all staff to keep them abreast of changes and issues. Line managers were also involved in contingency meetings and project groups, so they were well informed to brief their staff at monthly section meetings. Complementing these methods of communication was the Office Committee comprising representatives of management and staff (union and non-union) across local taxation. The main purpose of this committee was to bring together ideas and

Table IV.
Employees' evaluation (excluding managers) of how good managers are at employee communications and involvement: comparison between Best-Valued and non Best-Valued departments, *n* = 342

Department	Very good/good (per cent)	Poor/very poor (per cent)	Undecided (per cent)
<i>Involving employees in decision-making</i>			
Best-Valued departments	27	64	9
All other surveyed departments	35	56	9
<i>Keeping everyone up to date about proposed changes at work*</i>			
Best-Valued departments	57	31	12
All other surveyed departments	45	49	6
<i>Providing everyone with the chance to comment on proposed changes</i>			
Best-Valued departments	49	41	10
All other surveyed departments	38	55	7
<i>Responding to suggestions from employees</i>			
Best-Valued departments	34	53	13
All other surveyed departments	33	55	12

Note: *Chi-square test significant at the 0.01 level

suggestions from staff to discuss and decide whether or not they were worth pursuing. The overwhelming view elicited from interviewees was that this committee was slow to respond and not very effective. Despite the array of communication methods, the flow was largely one way, downwards with meaningful employee voice largely absent. Forums and technology (email) were available to staff to voice their views but as one senior taxation officer remarked: “we get feedback but the feedback would be that will happen anyway... it’s almost turning into a bit of a dictatorship in this is what’s happening regardless of whether its right or wrong”.

In payroll, while some sections had monthly staff meetings, others did not. Minutes of these meetings were passed on to senior managers but some employees expressed discontent that feedback from these minutes was not always forthcoming. Line managers, however, felt overwhelmed with information they received both in hard copy and electronic formats. They did not have time to digest it and pass on information to their staff:

OK, I’ll do the reading in my lunch hour. But, then, sometimes you don’t have a lunch hour. OK, I’ll do it in the evening. Well, then that means you’ve got to leave early enough to go home and do the reading. It’s, which one are we going to do here? Because you’ve got to do the reading to know what’s going on; you can’t tell the people what’s going on if you don’t what is going on yourself

Problems with communications in payroll clearly stemmed from the increasing workloads of line managers.

Conclusion

Best Value was implemented with a clear set of objectives . . . “a duty to deliver services to clear standards – covering both cost and quality – by the most effective, economic and efficient means available” (Cmnd 4014, 1998, Clause 7.2). This could only be achieved, however, by increasing Labour productivity through new ways of working. To deliver service improvement, therefore, a new control mechanism was necessary to secure the co-operation of the workforce. Workplace partnership was seen by the policy makers as the way in which to garner support from public service staff and their unions. Traditional bureaucratic centralised forms of management-union relationships were replicated at the local level, and utilised to forge such an arrangement at CityCo. The main public sector unions at CityCo, not wishing to be marginalised, decided that the best way to protect jobs was to grasp the nettle of Best Value and become involved in review panels and steering groups with local authority management. The strategy was aimed to keep public services in-house, an objective shared by managers in the departments selected to run Best Value pilots.

Union members in the Best-Valued departments remained passive and detached from this form of participation, despite being well informed of the changes (for variations in union strategy in the public sector see Danford *et al.*, 2003, pp. 124-7). This provision of information on work organisation change was more to do with improving managerial effectiveness than engendering employee involvement. Employee compliance to Best Value practices was achieved through agreements to changes in working practices with the local public service unions. The irony is that the aim of the unions to protect jobs was not achieved. The belief that jobs were insecure was significantly higher in Best-Valued than non Best-Valued areas.

This belief was borne out in local taxation. By June 2002, staff numbers here had reduced from 134 to 104.5 full-time equivalent positions. The long-term plan (2004/2005) is to further reduce the Service to 77 staff (Audit Commission, 2002). Where service improvement plans under best value are not achieved the likelihood is that these services will be contracted out. For example, subsequent to our research in December 2003 maintenance services for CityCo's public parks were given to a new private contractor. The prospect, therefore, is for further increases in work intensification. The rate of increase in intensive work effort was, at the time of our research, already significantly greater in Best-Valued departments than in non Best-Valued departments. These are some of the realities of Best Value. Employee benefits associated with partnership at work in Best-Valued areas were no better than non Best-Valued areas and in some cases significantly worse, for instance job security, job satisfaction and the intensification of work.

Despite the co-operative character of local industrial relations that provided a favourable environment for the introduction of Best Value and workplace partnership, this case study found little evidence to support a move towards "social cohesion" emphasised in partnership discourse. This discourse fails to take full account of the outcome of partnership for most workers. In this case study, unions, in the face of the requirements imposed by central government that Best Value must deliver cost reductions and quality improvement, accepted that it was unlikely that quality of working life issues, such as job satisfaction, would feature very highly. Union involvement in Best Value was aimed to augment its effort to keep public services in house and to protect the jobs of core workers. Unions succeeded in retaining services but were less successful in protecting jobs. Concern with other employment issues, such as work intensification, remained secondary. Unions had low expectations of CityCo delivering on favourable workplace partnership outcomes so the returns for union accommodation are even more negative. Accommodation to the new politico-economic pressures was not the only way open to trade unions, since interview data suggest that unions did not consider alternative strategies.

One such alternative approach, documented elsewhere, is premised on a somewhat more sceptical view of union-management involvement processes, known as "engage and change" (Stewart and Wass, 1998). This goes to the heart of new management strategies aimed at managing change on terms favourable to the employer. This is crucial since, if one is committed to a pluralistic approach, then it would seem obvious that variant accounts of change may arise. These would necessarily go beyond robust rhetoric since they would anticipate and depend on employee mobilisation. There is a clue in our data as to what it may be that employee's feel would represent focus of attention. Our results highlight that communication was seen as top down reflecting the employers' need to give voice to interests not always entirely to employees' liking. Critical issues around which a union "engaging to change" agenda might be developed include; planning to avoid intensification of work; a positive quality of working life agenda based on tight scrutiny of stress levels premised on a rejection of a long hours culture; employee involvement at team level on all dimensions linked to workplace change but with union involvement independent of management scrutiny. It might not solve the issue of outsourcing, but it would allow employee scope to anticipate job reduction

and the ability to plan union action to block most of it, together with increased stress and the diminution of the quality of working life more broadly.

This case study indicates that it is important for unions to seek alternative and more participative forms of resistance to new Labour's Best Value regime if the deterioration in public service workers' employment prospects and employment conditions is to be arrested. Far from introducing a new "neo-pluralist" paradigm based on mutual gain, partnership poses real dangers to employees and their unions should co-operation and consensus be vehicles for work intensification and job loss.

Note

1. The employee surveys included questions taken from the Workplace Employment Relations Survey (WERS98) to allow some comparison with the national data set.

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